

March 27, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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What a beautiful and rich gospel lesson we have today. Perhaps one of the most familiar parables in the gospels, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a powerful and interesting story, and one that can elicit a variety of reactions from us. And I wonder, as you heard the story, did you resonate with any of the characters? Maybe you relate to the younger son, eager to explore the world, but who faced challenges, and hoped to come back home? Or the older son, who was steadfast and honored his father? Or maybe, you relate to the Father and the complexity of his love for both of his sons?

When we hear a story like this, so rich with emotion and imagery, it is nearly impossible to hear it and not feel ourselves drawn in. We may find ourselves curious to know more, or forming strong opinions, or remembering a time when we had a similar experience? Still, for all that the parable tells us of the sons and the father, there is much about them we just don't know. Let's look at what we do know: At first glance, it is a tale of two brothers – one who strayed from home, and one who stayed. Looking deeper, we find it speaks to us of the joys and challenges of family and relationship.

Wanting to make his own mark, the younger one asks for and receives his inheritance, then eagerly leaves the protection of home to forge a new life, free of family and responsibility. Unwise choices, extravagant living and an unexpected famine leave his dreams unfulfilled. Broke and desperate, he is relegated to the lowly job of tending pigs. With no shelter, food or anyone who cares, he falls deep into despair, until, as Luke tells us, "he came to himself." In that moment, as he acknowledges the error of his behavior and actions, he wonders, Might he be able to return home to live at the edges of his father's land –certainly, not as a son, but as a slave? Ashamed, and uncertain, he sets off for home.

All the while, this wanderer's sibling remained, dutifully honoring his father, working in and tending the fields he will one day inherit; responsibly doing all that he thought was expected of him. But the true colors of this golden child come shining through when, learning of his wayward brother's return, and of the celebratory welcome shown him, his anger and resentment overtake him. His childish refusal to enter the house coupled with the accusations and judgments he shouts at his father, reveal almost immediately a deeper truth about him. Beneath the outward anger, we see a man who is hurting; a man who feels insignificant and uncherished. A man unable to receive a lost brother, so lost is he. The depth of his resentment is palpable.

There is a saying, "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Everywhere around us, we see people who are bitter about something. They spew their complaints and resentments with little regard for one other, and with little hope of resolving them. Our world is consumed with resentment, fueled by deep, unresolved pain.

Theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once defined resentment in this way: "Resentment, he suggested, happens when we move from the happy feeling of admiration to the unhappy feeling of jealousy." And it happens all too frequently in our lives. We see grievances and wars playing out among nations; bickering and judgment acted out in our families, businesses, communities, and sometimes, even in our churches.

Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard and the contemporary mystic, Richard Rohr, all suggest that the deep root of our resentment and unhappiness lies in our inability to admire and acknowledge others. Folks often feel threatened by those whose graces or virtues, opportunities or circumstances exceed their own. Sometimes the hurt they are carrying, but have failed to resolve, festers just below the surface. And when triggered, emotions can overflow. Priest and author, Ron Rolheiser, OMI, writes "What we seem to be incapable of admitting is

our own jealousy. What we don't admit is our own resentment. And what we don't admit, and never will admit, is how our need to cut down someone else is an infallible sign of our own jealousy and poor self-image.

We convince ourselves that there is nothing in the other we need admire or commend, and so we don't. The trap we can fall into, like the older brother in our story, is one soured by resentment, cynicism, judgment and jealousy.”

Looking back to our parable, it may be easy for us to identify the failings of the younger son evident in his poor decisions and in all the ways he failed. We probably know people in our own lives that we could point the finger at, naming their failings and inadequacies, and all the reasons they're not worthy of a fresh start, let alone entrance back into the fold. We may also feel some compassion for or even some comradery with older son, believing the older brother's anger is justified. We may know the experience of being the one who does the right thing, who sacrifices for others, yet fails to be recognized or celebrated. We may know what it feels like to be taken for granted. If we like the older son have come to believe that we're not valued or that we're not loved, resentment may arise in us, further separating us from others and from God.

But if we look to the Father, there we see an example of God's grace and mercy; of what it is to extend forgiveness and to offer reconciliation. We don't know if the father was hurt when his younger son left home, or angry that he squandered his inheritance. We only know that when the broken one came seeking forgiveness, the father went out to him, and offered it fully, without condition. And when the older son, consumed in his pain, refused to enter the house, the father again came out, listened, and responded with love, assurance, and an invitation into reconciliation and healing.

Family life can be complicated. Feelings get hurt, assumptions are made, and before you know it, there are breakdowns in our most beloved of relationships. What was once a place of refuge and belonging can become a place of tension and division. In the midst of our jealousy and anger, our deep hurt and resentments, we may lose our way. When the chasm grows too wide or the distance too far, any hope of reconciliation or return can disappear, leaving us feeling exiled and alone. Taking time to reflect on our feelings – the why we feel the way we feel – and then to meet in prayer the God who loves us beyond our understanding – can help Jesus assures us that no matter what, grace abounds! We may have messed up our lives or participated beyond our best abilities. Whether we have strayed or stayed, God's love is abundant. God welcomes the sinner and the saint. We can trust there is enough for us all. Know you are seen, loved and can rest in the welcoming arms of a God who loves you immeasurably!

Indeed, the first part of the story speaks to a variety of human emotional experiences: greed, selfishness, foolishness, struggle, suffering, regret, remorse and desperation, while second part of the story tells of anger, resentment, suffering and judgment, as well as compassion and love. And tucked into the middle, almost opposing experiences of excitement, joy, forgiveness and reconciliation.